

Teachers Notes

Making cordage with cumbungi

Cumbungi, bulrush, cattails or in Gamilaraay “burrarra”

Three types found in NSW. Two are native

1. Narrow leaved cumbingi (*Typha dominigenensis*)
2. Broad leaved cumbungi (*Typha orientalis*)
- 3.

Typha latifolia is an **introduced** European species

This aquatic plant grows all over Australia. Found in slow moving or stagnant waterways, for example around the shoreline of dams, ponds or drains; or along the edges of slow moving creeks. The underground stems (rhizomes) are rich in starch and can be cooked by steaming in an earth oven. After steaming, the rhizomes can be chewed to remove the starch and the remaining fibre used to make string. The leaves can also be split to make cordage.



The young shoots were eaten raw as a salad.

Viewed as a weed by many, Cumbungi provides important food and cover for wildlife including waterfowl and birds, providing protected nesting sites. It also provides protection against stream bank erosion. It has been successfully used as a biological means of cleaning water of excessive nutrients, heavy metals and other contaminants and filters runoff entering the water body.



Harvesting Cumbungi

1. Seek permission from owners of the property, or traditional custodians prior to harvesting. Do not harvest in National Parks or protected areas.
2. Do not remove the whole plant, Rather find the young shoots second to centre of the clump and pull. If it slowly gives way, the plant is giving permission to be harvested. If it doesn't give way, the plant does not want you to take it. I have found that early to mid spring is best for gathering cumbungi. It tends to be unwilling when the flower stalks start to form late spring, early summer. It is as if the plant is protecting itself during it reproductive time.
3. Only take what you need



Storing and preparing

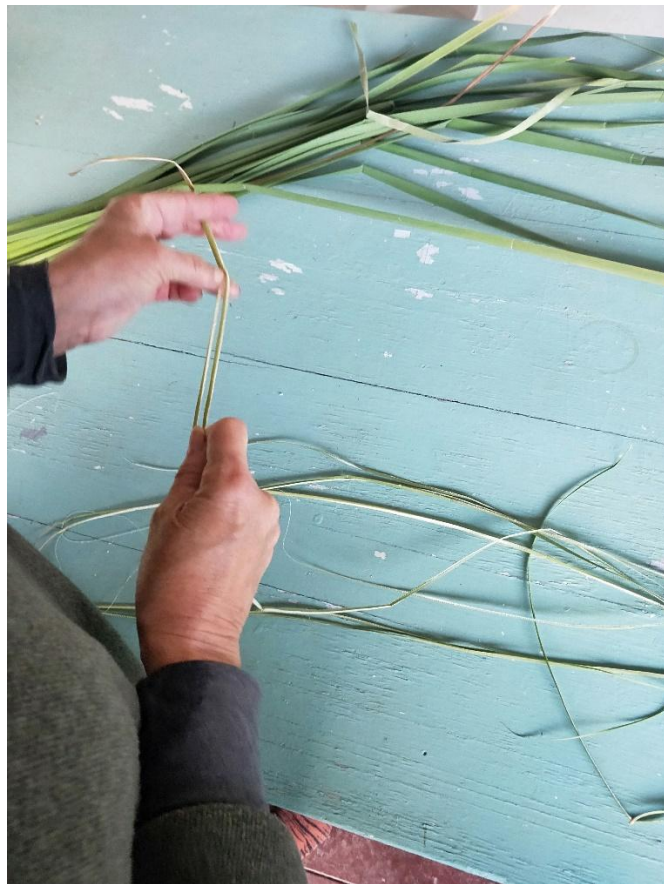
Once cumbungi is gathered, tie it in a bunch and hang in a cool dry place. Keep aerated as you want to prevent it from getting moldy.

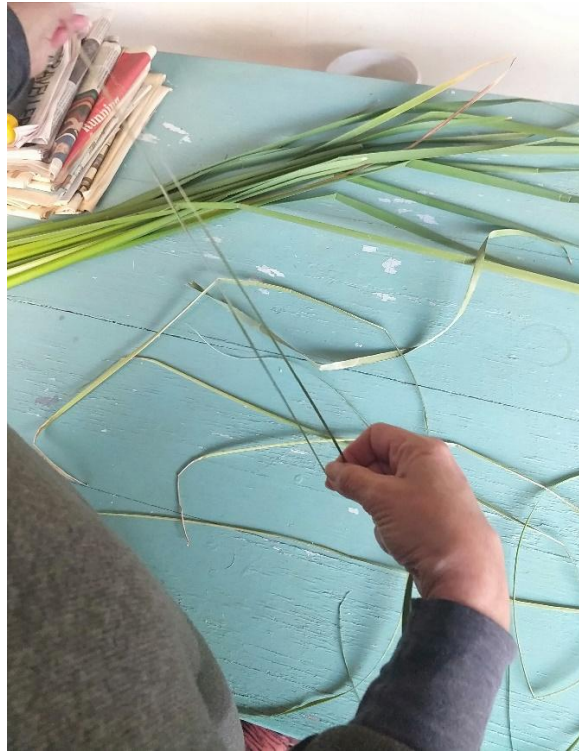
It is good to use it within a couple of days of harvesting.

To rehydrate after storage and so its flexible enough to make cordage, wet a towel and wrap it around the leaves until they soften. Do not leave leaves in the moist towel for more than a day or two as it will begin to go moldy.

To prepare:

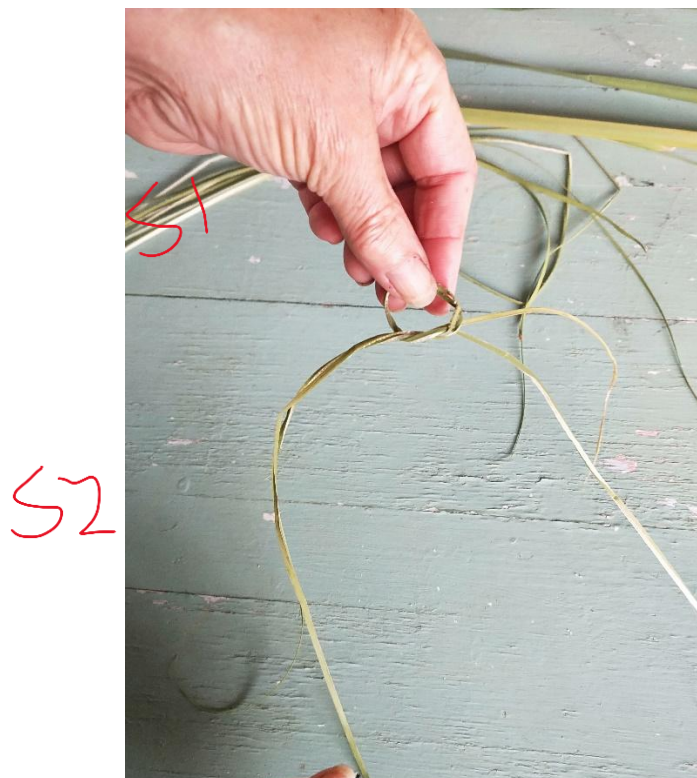
Using a small paring knife (I use my thumbnail) split the length of the leaf into 3-5mm wide strips. At the root end, there may be juicy, jelly like substance. Simply run your thumb nail down the length to remove.





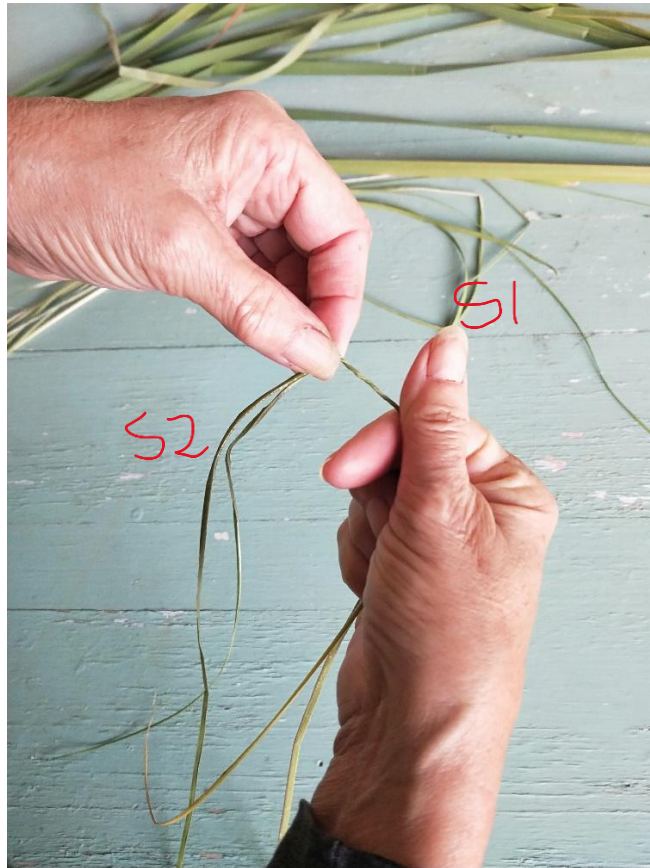
Making cordage:

Get 2-3 strands of split leaf and fold them just off half way and tie a simple knot, leaving an open loop. It is better to use more thin strips than fewer wide strips.



Hold knot between thumb and forefinger with loose ends across your body to the right.
So now you have two long bunches of fibres (S1 and S2)

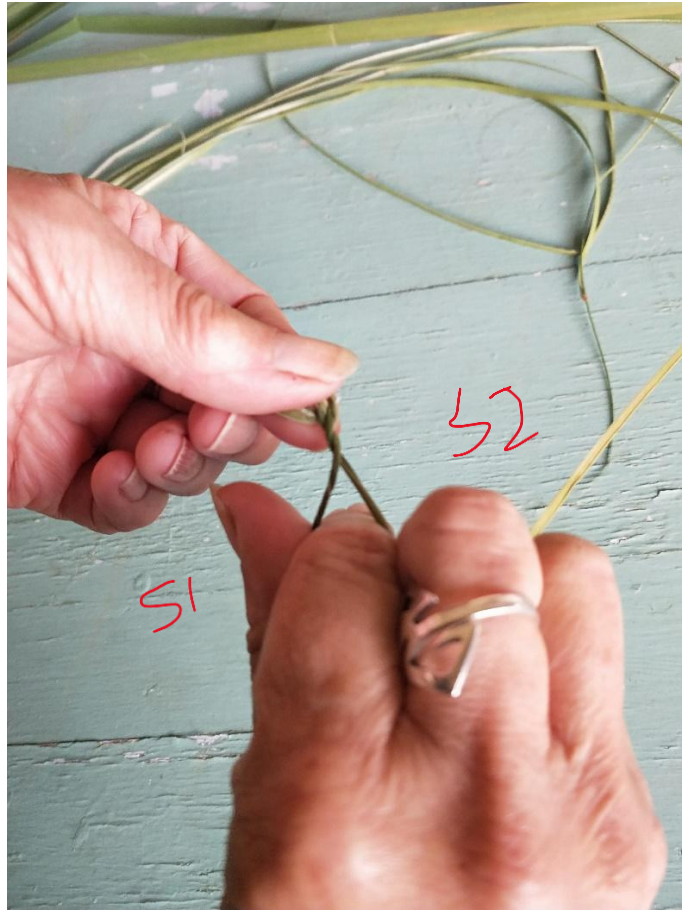
Hold the strands (S1) which is furthest from your body between thumb and forefinger on your right hand, and twist the fibre away from your body. Twist 2-3 times.



Bring S1 across the top of S2 towards your body.

Reposition your left thumb and forefinger to hold the twisted fibre in place.

Now twist S2 (now furthest from your body) away from your body, and cross it over S1 toward your body





SO always twist away from your body and cross the twisted fibre over the top towards you. Away and over, away and over.....

You may have to occasionally separate the two strand lengths as they tend to get a bit tangled.

Adding fibre: When you get to the end of your fibre but you want to make the cordage longer.

Do this when you still have 4-5 cms of leaf left.

Separate S1 and S2, holding between thumb and forefinger of left hand.

Get 1-3 strands of split leaves, and fold in approx. half (I always leave it just of half way so that you don't have all your fibres running out at the same time, and creating clumpy joins) The number of strands you use will determine the thickness of the cordage.



Put the fold up between thumb and forefinger of L hand and have the two lengths of the leaf join with S1 and S2



Continue to twist and over as before. The new leaf strand will stay in place after 2-3 turns. Keep doing this until you reach your desired length.

You can make the cordage as long as you like. However, if you are weaving a dilly bag or net of some kind, it is best to make the cordage as you need it as you are always weaving with the unsecured end.



For something a little different, you can twist dhinawan (emu) feathers into the cordage.



Stockists

As an alternative to cumbungi, you can use lomandra (found in most Aussie gardens) or raffia.

Madagascan raffia can be purchased in bulk from

Raffia Connection <https://www.theraffiaconnection.com.au>

String Harvest <https://stringharvest.com.au>

Ed artsupplies.com.au

Emu Feathers can be purchased from

<https://emulogic.com.au/>

<https://emuheaven.com.au/>